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SUBJECT: USUNESCO: UNESCO BASIC SCIENCES DIVISION
SEEKS TO PROMOTE PUBLIC SCIENCE AWARENESS, PARTICULARLY
IN DEVELOPING WORLD

¶1. SUMMARY. On November 3, Mission staff attended an informal UNESCO panel discussion "60 Minutes on the Advancement of Scientific Knowledge," presented by the Basic Sciences Division of the Science Sector. This was one of a series of talks to mark the organization's 60th anniversary. While the primary objective of this presentation was to identify the projects and activities of the basic sciences division, the sector's Director also commented on the division's strengths and weaknesses. END SUMMARY.

¶2. The basic sciences division considers that science should be a key component of basic education; science, at the advanced level, is important in advancing development at the country and regional level. Africa was admittedly the division's priority. However, the presenters voiced concern that interest in the sciences has declined. In order to reverse this trend, long lasting political support is needed and science should be made more visible to the public.

¶3. The basic sciences division is involved in various activities to generate public awareness and interest in science. For example, the creation of worldwide and regional scientific centers and networks is meant to foster knowledge sharing. One such example is the Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME), located in Amman, Jordan which brings together scientists from across the Middle East, including Israel. Holding international science exhibitions and contests to promote excellence in and popularizing science through prizes, awards, partnerships (like the L'Oral-UNESCO awards and fellowships), summer school, science days, and newsletters is a way of bringing the public's attention to the science sector. The Basic Sciences Division is also working on providing basic chemistry kits to schools; with the Education sector, it plans to provide "non-biased" pedagogical teaching kits on GMOs. Despite these activities and examples of cross-sector partnership, Maciej Nalecz, Director of the Division of Basic and Engineering Sciences, commented on the division's weaknesses.

¶4. Prompted by two comments from the audience, Mr. Nalecz agreed that cooperation between the Science and Education sectors may largely be cosmetic. He remarked that collaboration between these sectors is much easier in the field where they are more flexible, spontaneous, and able to work without the hierarchical structure that exists at UNESCO.

¶5. COMMENT: Although Nalecz's assessment of the state of cooperation between the Science Sector and the Education sector is rather downbeat, we note that the new ADG for education Peter Smith is committed to cross-sector efforts, so that we have hopes in this area. The planned overall review of the Natural Sciences and the Social Sciences sectors, approved at the October 2005 General Conference - will be an opportunity to tackle some of these problems. We will also be keeping an eye on the "non-biased" teaching kits on GMOs to ensure that the Science Sector stays out of politics.
End Comment.

KOSS